

HORSE CARE MYTHS & TIPS

By Ruthann Smith
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Stop Tail Rubbing

Everyone seems to know a horse or dog that is tortured by itching. Veterinarians typically declare it the result of pinworms or allergies to bugs. Parasites may cause tail rubbing. However, all the horses I know are on a stringent worming program. Rubbing persists. Bugs may start the cycle, though “allergies” can be a blanket term for “we don’t know.” I have never known treatments based on those strategies to offer lasting relief.

While braiding the manes and tails of 12,000+ horses, I had plenty of time to think about this. My livelihood depended on maintaining healthy tails. I realized typical daily practices leave skin vulnerable. A healthy comprehensive approach includes minimizing irritants as well as promoting the horse’s natural defenses. By doing so, tail rubbing, as well as dogs’ hot spots, can be solved once and for all. This is proven.

Conventional and home remedies may take away the sting temporarily. However, they ultimately feed the cycle by drying out the skin or attracting sun or dirt that parch skin. Think about it. Imagine you have been in the sun all day. Then, a mosquito bites your arm. You itch it. Next, you want to rip your arm off! Dry skin is intolerant and slow to heal. Scratching it exasperates the problem, creating swelling. That secondary condition can be worse than the initial one. Without addressing it, the problem is perpetuated.

Cleaning genitals can be pivotal. If a horse is crusty and uncomfortable, its only option is to sit on its tail. Some mares need their teats and under the tail wiped every day. A clean damp cloth or paper towel is all you need. Anything that leaves a residue will attract dirt. Many wipes are alcohol-based. Both dirt and alcohol are drying. If really crusty, soften the guck first. Otherwise, pulling it off can hurt, and therefore teach the horse to kick. I’d use olive oil or a handy salve. Wash it with a moisturizing shampoo. Then, simply wipe clean with a damp cloth as a daily routine. Geldings and stallions need their sheaths cleaned, preferably every month. Some don’t get as dirty and can get away with having it done twice a year, but monthly is much better. Again, if needed, soften the smegma first. Sheath cleaners work well. The sheath pulls up into two chambers, so be sure you get both clean. Rinse very well. Otherwise,



All tail rubbing and dog hot spots can be solved once and for all.

infection can ensue, leaving the sheath swollen for the rest of the horse’s life. If your horse resists or you are uncomfortable, sheath cleaning is a good place to spend your money. Generally, the process is easy, especially if it is routine.

Even still, with the best and most attentive care, many horses rub like mad. In my experience, dry skin and open pores prime tails for irritation. Then, fly spray, detangler, and the sun can burn. Itch that, and the problem is quickly out of control.

To ensure instant and lasting relief for every tail rubber and dog with hot spots, you need to come at the problem from every direction. The idea is to minimize irritants as well as: cool, soothe, moisturize and nourish to fortify the skin.

Here are some rules to live by:

- Curry and brush the top of the dock with a dandy brush daily. This will stimulate natural protective oils and exfoliate to release them. Several quick strokes with a stiff or medium dandy brush will do the trick.
- Clean is important. But, never use shampoo with salt. Sodium chloride is a standard ingredient that leaves skin defenseless. It strips natural, protective oils as well as parches the skin.
- Don’t use detanglers. They are silicone-based and/or oily. So, they can clog pores with toxins and attract drying agents such as sun and dirt. A good all-in-one shampoo should be conditioning. If you comb the tail when wet, it will dry full and easy to manage. With the proper shampoo and comb-

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ing, hair will want to separate instead of make ringlets. So, no conditioner nor detangler is needed. To comb tails when wet, I always twist the length, hold the bottom and use a fat comb to organize hair from the bottom to my grip. Work your grip up the tail, always combing from the bottom up to the grip.

- Avoid oily or greasy products. They clog pores and attract sun and dirt, which parch skin. Regardless of marketing claims, this dynamic inhibits healing. If the objective is shine, a healthy all-in-one shampoo and daily grooming can achieve a much richer luster, with deep layers that glimmer. Nothing beats a natural, healthy glow.

- Choose a water-based, non-toxic fly spray if possible. Or, use oil-based ones sparingly as they can burn, especially in the sun. Don't spray the top of the dock. The safest places to use them are in shaded areas under the chest and belly.

- Pay attention to the sun. If you need to put a little sunscreen on the dock, I'd use one that is PABA and paraben-free. Waterproof ones are greasy and clog pores. Be sure the tail is always squeaky clean for braiders.

If your horse is already irritated, treatment should reduce swelling to break the cycle as well as promote healing by boosting defenses. Brushing a tail rubbed raw can be counterproductive. Instead, wash it with a quality all-in-one shampoo that is: sodium chloride-free, rich in aloe vera, and uses only medical-grade tea tree oil. Nature's best antiseptic and antifungal, tea tree oil, is a compound. So, the quality can vary greatly. Use only tea tree oil specified as the highest, medical-grade. It will kill irritants without depleting the skin. With the right shampoo, no chemicals and clean genitals, most horses

stop rubbing.

The worst cases may need a handy salve to break the cycle by reducing swelling as well. Keep in mind that the salve can have a little hydrocortisone in it, if that needs to be declared or avoided for competition. Generally, just the all-in-one shampoo remedies the problem.

Tail rubbing can become a habit. So, if you follow these recommendations, you should see the skin improve quickly. Handy salve has cooled down the worst cases within minutes. However, without thinking, your horse may still sit on its tail for a few days. Continue treatment. Within a few days, the horse will forget to rub.

Keeping these principles in mind, you can stop tail rubbing and hot spots, too. Opt for healthy practices and products. If need be, a handy salve can break the itching cycle, and an all-in-one shampoo keeps you out of the loop by enriching skin and hair. Both products kill irritants while soothing, cooling, moisturizing and fortifying skin, roots and hair for rapid healing and regrowth. With these sensibilities and routines, your beloved animals can always be comfortable in their skin. ■



Lucky Braids™ Handy Salve and All-In-One Shampoo, combined with the grooming routines outlined here, have solved all tail rubbing and dog hot spot cases to date. In fact, hair is generally growing back within three days. Lucky Braids coat care products are available at local tack shops and at topturnout.com. For more tips and to ask Ruthann questions, visit Lucky Braids for Top Turnout™ on Facebook.SM